Afghanistan Army Development:

What Went Wrong

by Tommy J. Tracy

In the summer of 2009, after an abrupt International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) leadership change from General McKiernan to General McChrystal, preparation for a surge of forces and a fresh approach toward Afghanistan's security situation ensued—ironically not one designed to ensure victory over an insurgency, but rather one to execute a graceful U.S. departure from Afghanistan.[1] Although the surge, which peaked in 2011, achieved a number of successes to include increasing the number of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), the Afghan National Army (ANA) remains ineffective and incapable, which will likely lead to a rapid erosion in Afghanistan's overall military security situation if the NATO-backed ISAF totally withdraws from Afghanistan. As this article will illustrate, this foreboding forecast, based on the early-on approaches taken by the international coalition toward establishing ANA capacity during the critical 2009–2010 period, will likely be accurate. The failure of properly conducting the surge during its initial phases has had lingering effects, as the Pentagon admits that the ANA remains incapable of autonomous operations and plagued by the same problems that surfaced during the 2009–2010 period.[2]

One of several issues that this article will address is the relative indifference displayed by all actors—from the highest-level strategic leaders down to the operational uniformed officers—when it came to executing strategic and operational objectives designed to ensure Afghanistan's future security. The indifference partly resulted from the ISAF mission being purposely under resourced, while America, the lead nation in the coalition, shifted its focus toward an insular domestic agenda. In *Obama's Wars*, Bob Woodward seems to point out that U.S. strategic leaders wanted to initiate a temporary limiting surge, popularized earlier as the way to achieve military success in Iraq—designed to give notice to Afghan leaders that they had a brief window of opportunity to take charge of their destiny as the U.S. led coalition readied for a withdrawal from the region. This was called the "leverage option."[3] On the ground and in advisory meetings, the surge translated into a U.S. exit strategy to the Afghans, and in reality, that is what it was. Despite a seemingly oblivious

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Congress that thought the surge was designed to win the war, McChrystal was embarking on a journey that called for executing a campaign with inadequate forces and resources. He found himself sandwiched between varying groups of hostile adversaries and a corrupt central Afghan government, dealing with embarrassing coalition mishaps and trying to develop a relationship with a suspicious U.S. ambassador.[4]

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By 2009, the American military, with many of its leaders having endured seven years of war, was fatigued and dealing with a new Commander-in-Chief, who was intent on gracefully finding a way out of Afghanistan but dragging out the departure to first close out the more unpopular war in Iraq. In the summer of 2009, ISAF, although staffed with civilian and interagency members, was in a dismal resourcing state. Its entire ANSF force rebuilding mission rested within a single two-star command—U.S. Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A). CSTC-A's advisory and organizational staff was well-below strength and had a single subordinate operational command, Task Force Phoenix.

Since 2003, the international coalition slowly built up ANA troop strength, from 1,750 soldiers in March 2003[5] to 60,000 soldiers by the spring of 2008. With newly instituted and accelerated growth goals, ANA numbers now increased rapidly but in an uncontrollable fashion. In the fall of 2009, an across-the-board monetary pay package was to serve as the catalyst for accelerated ANA growth. The package was primarily staffed by CSTC-A and later approved and financed by the international community (IC). Senior Afghan military leaders were also involved in the process. However, the U.S. insistence on maintaining an all-volunteer, federated ANA failed to account for the political and ethnic cultural challenges that existed in Afghanistan. Ironically, although the monetary package was significant (a new inductee now earned nearly two to three times the country's per capita), it was nevertheless modest in comparison to what was possible.

Afghan leaders demanded that the IC limit the across-the-board pay raise amounts and delete all bonuses except for locality pay (as a means to incentivize assignments in the volatile southern regions). The Afghans feared select bonuses and staggered raises would lead to greater internal corruption practices. As a donor state with no developed internal revenue system, the Afghan military leaders wanted a more modest across-the-board pay raise rather than a larger unsupportable one because they knew that one day the central government would have to pay the hefty personnel costs or risk a massive reduction in force. Feedback for the pay package was solicited from the U.S. Embassy economics officer, who obtained occupational salary data in order to ensure that the pay raise did not cause a damaging jolt to the economy. The pay package debate lingered on for months but was rolled out with great fanfare in the late fall of 2009.

The pay raise was necessary because although ANA strength was steadily increasing, having surpassed 90,000 in June 2009, it actually stalled and decreased throughout the summer and early fall. With the new ANA growth goal of 134,000 men by October 2010 (revised from December 2011), something had to be done to stimulate growth in the federated ANA. With the surge in December 2009, CSTC-A's newly named command NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan (NTM-A/CSTC-A) in

Kabul quickly executed an accelerated ANSF growth plan designed to build capacity. Across town, ISAF's Joint Command (IJC) focused on enhancing capabilities as it wanted ANA forces involved in immediate combat operations—starting in February 2010. The 30 percent increase in soldier strength occurring over such a short annual period caused problems for the ANA, as it would for any Army.

Simultaneously, the international command structure changed. CSTC-A expanded into a three-star NATO Training Mission command (NTM-A/CSTC-A). TF Phoenix now fell under IJC. Expanding both commands took an inordinate amount of time to complete, especially resourcing staff and advisory billets and building the infrastructure needed to support the two expanding organizations. At the same time, the commands were trying to grow the ANSF and build the accompanying infrastructure to support such a force. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of additional coalition forces were rotating into and out of theater, and Taliban forces were conducting some of the most intense fighting since December 2001. Something had to give. Consequently, the mission of building ANA capacity was executed in a hasty and uncoordinated and unplanned fashion. Although a campaign plan was supposedly developed, little of it seemed transparent to those executing the day-to-day advisory mission. Although the military commands and the U.S. Embassy conducted interagency coordination at least weekly, the relationship between the two, newly-formed, three-star commands seemed icy at best. Prior to CSTC-A and TF Phoenix merging, they conducted monthly ANA assessment and coordination conferences that covered both Afghan training and operations; now, the two separate, bifurcated commands held no sanctioned meetings, which resulted in worsening stovepiped efforts as each organization, collocated within Kabul, orchestrated its own separate ANA training and separate operational missions.

This situation impacted ANA force development. Afghan infantry battalions were formed from recruits that received only 8 weeks of basic training (reduced from 10 weeks). Recruits were issued and trained on the impractical M16 rifle and given poorly designed uniforms and unsuited military hardware. In terms of ANA growth and development, the mission was about quantity and meeting performance metrics, not quality or imparting enduring capabilities. For example, the ANA was issued high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) instead of the simpler, easier to maintain former Soviet model wheeled vehicles. Afghan soldiers could not repair or even safely drive HMMWVs, which resulted in high numbers of accidents. As noted in a recent *Washington Post* article, to this day, Afghan units cannot care for and sustain their issued equipment, which degrades combat readiness and effectiveness.[6] In order to prevent mass defections, the newly formed Afghan battalions—*kandaks*—would be deployed from training centers with no prior notice and in total secrecy of their anticipated assigned locations, which was more often than not hotly contested combat areas throughout the southern and southeastern portions of the country. Absent without leave (AWOL) and other attrition rates reached alarming levels especially in the 205th Corps's provincial southern area, as deployed homesick soldiers were assigned far from their families to unfamiliar, ominous settings where

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they resided in poorly constructed billets or waited for hardened billets to be constructed.

The enabling organizations—engineers, intelligence, aviation, demining, and logistics—needed in any army remained underdeveloped, in part because of the low literacy rate among ANA soldiers and the difficulty in obtaining the sophisticated equipment needed to support these types of organizations.. With robust efforts by the coalition to educate Soldiers to an elementary level,[7] illiteracy in the ANA is decreasing; however, attaining literate soldiers remains a problem. The more sophisticated combat-type units, such as engineer and artillery, must be staffed with enlightened soldiers and require expensive hardware, longer training periods, and extensive sustainment. All this takes time to develop and quality equipment donations.

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Although considered coalition partners, the ANA is not an ally. So what force structure should the Afghans have in relation to other militaries in the region? Because of the continued concern of green on blue attacks, trust between the ISAF and ANA is often questioned. When confronted, a senior ANA general admitted that there was no effective vetting process to ensure that the Taliban would not infiltrate the ANA. Some express the belief that Taliban sympathizers who join the ANA and experience the benefits of shelter, pay, and meals, plus a robust literacy program will align with the federated army. This is too often not the case. Even though every recruit provides biometric measurements and local tribal and religious leaders vouch for new enlistees, green on blue attacks continue to plague the relationship between the ISAF-led coalition forces and the ANA.

Soldiers stationed far from home and led by officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) from different ethnic affiliations, high casualty and injury rates, and drug availability contributed to high AWOL and desertion rates and a decrease in reenlistments. As ANA soldiers complete their initial enlistments, this increasing reluctance to reenlist will become a major problem. In addition, maintaining a proportional Army (18 percent officers and 32 percent NCOs) is difficult. The accelerated growth created severe shortages of capable, mid-grade NCOs and officers. Potential officers and NCOs were available, but constricting ethnicity requirements imposed on the Afghans prevented combat seasoned (former Mujahidin) Afghans from rejoining the ranks With initial-entry soldier strength exceeding 100 percent capacity, required leaders in the deployed units was alarmingly low. The situation was so dire that enlisted soldiers were sent to holding camps at the training centers because deployed units refused to accept them. Finding junior leaders was difficult since selection was based on literacy. The imbalance in leaders within the units came to a breaking point in the spring of 2010 when soldiers with only one year's service and a clean record were automatically authorized for promotion to NCO. Meanwhile IJC was forcing the Defense Minster to deploy units—inexperienced as they were—to participate in immediate combat operations in the Kandahar region.

On the positive side, in the period 2009–2010, an established, standardized training system was in place to train Afghan recruits. Enlistees received basic military and literacy training. Although inexperienced, some of the more enlightened enlistees received additional training and assumed NCO roles. Most officers were being assessed through an Officer

Candidate School program. Officers graduating from the military academy are well-educated and trained. Left to their own devices, the ANA often took practical approaches to getting things done. Graduates from the national military academy and medical school, considered the most educated and elite members of Afghan society, were equitably assigned across the army through a lottery system devised by Afghans. The intent was to prevent graduates from seeking out favorable assignments in the Kabul area or obtaining cushy jobs far away from the fighting. The Afghans also have great pride in their commando forces, which are, admittedly, the best combat-ready forces in the country. Additionally, through the efforts of tireless advisors and contractors, Afghans tacitly decentralized and streamlined promotions and reenlistments and developed a rewards and retirement system, with the intent of slowing down attrition and allowing for a merit-based leader promotion system. The Afghans also fielded a computerized, personnel-management system, managed by select educated Afghan soldiers, many of whom were lured into the service by the increased pay. The ANA issued every trained soldier a military identification card and an electronic transfer banking account card; however, the use of non-Afghan contractors–Indian in many cases–to manage the program leaves the ANA open for possible personnel identification theft and espionage.

High attrition numbers, in part induced by high casualty rates, poor camp conditions, and safety-related incidences, continue. Units sent to the hinterlands have only impractical means of getting soldiers home during vacation periods. Many soldiers spend weeks trying to find safe ways to and from their homes and units. Transportation across the country is lacking. For example, soldiers congregated by the hundreds for days and weeks near the airport in Kabul trying to hitch a ride back to their units on hard-to-come by military flights. Railroad traffic is non-existent, and no formalized transportation infrastructure exists. New recruits show up to the training center after hitching rides, walking, or catching a cab. In a country where few own automobiles, the ANA lacks the resources to support the needs of their soldiers, which inadvertently adds to the AWOL rate.

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In addition, ethnic requirement restraints placed on the ANA hinder growing the force. The 2001 Bonn Agreement is the source that lays out the organization and staffing of the ANA and the Ministry of Defense (MoD). Staffing should be based on individual merit and in accordance with accepted principles of balance among the different ethnic groups. Based on the 2001 United Nations population census of Afghanistan, proper ethnic balancing for military and civilian accessions into the ANA and MoD must be based on the following percentages (plus or minus 5 percentage points):

- Pashtun: 44 percent
- Tajik: 25 percent
- Hazara: 10 percent
- Uzbek: 8 percent
- Other: 13 percent

On December 1, 2002, a Presidential decree provided reforms to create an ethnically-balanced ANA using the following percentages:

- Pashtun: 42 percent
- Tajik: 27 percent
- Hazara: 9 percent
- Uzbek: 9 percent
- Other :13 percent [8]

Interestingly, the actual text of the December 2001 Bonn Agreement does not address the requirement to ethnically diversify ANSF, but it does require the "reintegration of the mujahidin into the new Afghan security and armed forces."[9] However, the contrary occurred. Both the Afghan leadership and coalition forces insisted on adhering to an ethnically-diverse army force, which was not the case for the police force. Hundreds if not thousands of former mujahidin fighters (mostly non-Pastun) tried in vain to reenter the Army, but could not, as many were Tajik, which is over-represented in the ANA. Unfortunately, many Pashtun, especially those from the southern regions, are resentful of a federated Afghanistan military. On the other hand, thousands from other ethnic groups desire to join the ANA but are unable to do so. In the case of the officers, primarily Hazara and Tajik, many were kept in the officer holding *kandak* near Kabul for months, with no job or unit assignment simply because of the constraints placed on and by the Afghan central government and supported by the coalition to ensure diversification across the ANA. The severe shortage of willing Pashtuns resulted in a musical chairs game of pulling Pashtuns out of the operational force in order to ensure that newly formed units were ethnically diversified, while stranding fully trained (mostly Hazara and Tajik) military personnel, who were getting paid, but doing nothing and having no place to go. The only time that ethnic diversity is assured is when a newly-formed unit deploys upon completion of its initial training or upon refitting after combat operations. Ethnic diversification among the units is bound to collapse as enlistment contracts expire, leaving units without experienced leaders. Too much emphasis is placed on ethnic diversity. Even the Bosnian Federation Army is not held to that standard, where ethnic diversity occurs at higher brigade echelons while battalion and smaller organizations remain ethnically pure (Serb, Croat, or Muslim.)[10] Seasoned experienced soldiers stationed in the contentious eastern and southern parts of the country reenlisted at lower rates as casualties increased and AWOLs, especially in the southern provinces, spiked. Pashtun recruits remain difficult to assess resulting in ethnic imbalances across the force. In 2010, recruiting in the southern, ethnically Pashtun Kandahar region accounted for less than 5 percent of all Afghan recruits. In addition, those that are joining from the other regions are being assigned to the unpopular southern areas of the country. In fairness, Pashtuns are joining the army, but are doing so at great peril. Many are migrating north to Kabul to enlist in the Kabul region. They then risk their safety by serving in the contentious Pashtun, non-Dari-speaking southern provinces. In the summer of 2010, two *kandaks* were rotated; the one rotating to the south saw a spike in AWOLs once word reached the unit.

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As the across-the-board pay increase was enacted and Afghan soldiers started streaming toward recruiting stations, the coalition lost an opportunity to turn the human tide of the conflict against the Taliban. By announcing the pay increase at the start of the non-fighting wintery 2009–2010 season, potential recruits swarmed into recruiting stations only to be turned away because coalition trainers, training sites, and logistical units had exceeded capacity and simply were unable to equip and train the human surge. This was much to the consternation of

senior Afghan military leaders who finally saw an opportunity to deplete the Taliban of recruits for the following fighting season. In November 2009, there were 2,300 new recruits. After the pay raise, the following month saw a two-fold increase in recruits, and during the month of April 2010, 8,000 recruits processed through ANA recruiting stations.[11]

The ANA has made great strides in increasing its overall strength. Maintaining that strength and having the enduring capabilities to secure the Afghan people from internal and external enemies remains to be seen. ISAF should remain engaged in supporting Afghan forces and complete its mission by building enduring capabilities in the ANSF. Personnel growth numbers in the ANA exceeded expectations; however, the coalition and the Afghans must address the shortages of experienced military leaders, solve ethnic imbalance issues, build more infrastructure support, fix military equipment problems, develop sustainment strategies for equipment, and resolve morale issues so the ANA can be effective and more able to ensure the security of its people. ***IAJ***

NOTES

1 Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, Simon and Shuster, New York, 2010, pp. 261–262, 295, 301, and 303.

2 Tom Bowman, "Pentagon: Afghan Army Has Come a Long Way," National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=207209846>, accessed on November 8, 2013.

3 Woodward, pp. 295 and 301.

4 General Stanley McCrystal, *My Share of the Task*, Penguin Group, New York, 2013, pp. 288, 291, 331, 339, and 340.

5 Author's journal notes while deployed to Afghanistan.

6 Kevin Seiff, "A Fix It Problem for Afghan Soldiers," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2013.

7 Edwin Mora, "U.S. Working to Raise Literacy of Afghan Forces to 3rd Grade Level Before 2014 Turnover," cnsnews.com, May 31, 2011, <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/us-working-raise-literacy-afghan-forces-3rd-grade-level-2014-turnover>, accessed on November 7, 2013.

8 Author's historical files, July 6, 2010.

9 "Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions," UN Security Council, <http://peacemaker.un.org /sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/AF_011205_AgreementProvisionalArrangementsinAfghanistan%28en%29.pdf>, accessed on November 7, 2013.

10 Author's conversation with a Bosnian Army Captain in October 2013 at Fort Lee, VA.

11 Author's historical files.